HISTORICAL OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O H 22

Penny, Fred

Interviewed By

Patricia Young

February 18, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: FRED PENNEY

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 18 February 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with Fred Penney at his home at Desert Island in Rancho Mirage. The date of February 18, 1980, Monday, and it's eleven-fifteen in the morning. This interview is for the Historical Society of Palm Desert by Patricia Young.

I think the first thing I'd like to talk about is how you came to the desert to begin with.

FP: Well, that's rather interesting in the fact that, oh, I'd been coming out to the desert for at least thirty-five years off and on, living in Libertyville, Illinois. And I happened to know a friend of mine, we went to school together in Fullerton, Nebraska. That was my home town. And he got me interested in the desert, and we rented a place. And then I went back east again. But the desert always fascinated me because I think, I'd been doing so many ballets and the smoketrees

reminded me of a sort of a floating ballet dancer. And even today, when I start in painting, I try to keep that whispy transparent quality to a smoketree. In other words, they're very elusive. But from then on, I went back east and then came back to California. And it was always my desire to paint the desert. And this became a fascinating subject to me. And that was the start. Then we moved out here later and left Libertyville. That's the beginning of the romance of the desert for me. I don't know anything particularly from a historical side of it, only that, oh, what I've heard, you know, different phases of, all the origination of the desert, Palm Desert, by the Henderson group. And that it was a proving ground for Patton's army to get a feeling of the desert country. And recently I'd see Cliff Henderson and his wife said, well, Cliff is going to have to start another town. It's getting too crowded. (chuckle) But what other questions would you want to bring up about the desert? I'll see if I can answer them.

PY: When did you first actually move here?

FP: Well, you know, dates is a very strange thing to me. If you'd ask me how old my son was, I couldn't tell you.

(laughter) And, you know, that's the reason I didn't want my eightieth birthday. I didn't want to have that tossed up at me, a man of eighty. But I think that's a good philosophy. If you don't think about time and age and make the best of each day, I think it's a lot better. But, you know, you asked me a strange question, and a lot of people ask me the same thing. But I think my first recollection of California was when I was, oh, about ten years old. And it was down at Long Beach. And there was the pike down there fascinated me. If I'd run away, why they could find me down at the pike. Maybe the penny arcade or back of the swimming pool, someplace like that. But then my grandfather bought an orange ranch in the San Dimas. And we went out there and lived for awhile. I lived there with my mother and I always remember the beautiful sunsets. And incidentally, the sunsets here are the best times to paint definitely because there's an early morning light that's beautiful. But the desert sunsets stay for at least five minutes, where the morning lights, sunrise, changes too rapidly. And we do get that effect from taking slides, and then applying it to a subject, a desert subject, you know. We take, oh, evening skies and morning skies, you know.

Then I have a large transparency, a whole file maybe, maybe a, oh, at least a, oh, five hundred or more of just a box full of slides, just nothing but the desert sky, which can be applied to either a marine or a landscape of any sort. But that's, I think, I always remember the pike. I regret progress as Long Beach, I go down there and there's no more pike, you know. It's all built up.

PY: How do you feel about the progress around here?

FP: Well, (laughter) you know, I had an interview on TV, and I went down to the lady to do this tape, you know. And then we passed Duvall down here, and she admired a painting that I had of verbenas. And before we left. And it was Gloria Greer, a delightful person. And she always admired that painting hanging over there. I said, now here we are at Duvall. Now see where I painted that. And she said, well, I don't see anything. I know you don't because there's a progress, houses, houses, houses. Right over here. And, of course, she, I think one thing the artists love, someplace to have preserved so you can paint or go out and enjoy the desert, like the Living Desert, or the La Quinta Canyon. There's one place they can't louse up, I don't think. Or the floods and what

have you because the water comes down there. And they do have the floods. And the same way with the end of Jackson Street down where you've been, down the fish traps. And we hope that they preserve some places where the artists can sit out and paint. In fact, we're making this tape right at the desert island. I used to paint verbenas out here, about where I'm sitting, strange. So that's it. The history of the desert, I know very little about. But it's nice to be interviewed and asked a few questions.

PY: Did you know many of the other desert painters?

FP: Yes, I did. I'm glad you brought that up because you were mentioned that these tapes are sort of a record of all the artists or the historians or of anyone that's, that loves the desert. I think it's a great thing because I knew Jimmy Swi~~t~~n terton real well, and we were out in the Monument Valley for two weeks. And all the stories he would tell were fascinating, you know. In fact, there's one quotation from the book, you know, that Ainsworth turned out. It was when Randolph Hearst, well, he was just joking when he said this, but Jimmy Swi~~t~~n terton showed him some of his paintings. And he said, now you see, Mr. Hearst, what I could do. I've quit drinking.

And he took one look at us. Well, you better start drinking again. But he really didn't mean it because he, all during his life, even when he retired, he gave him a substantial income so he could carry on his paintings. And, of course, being out with Jimmy Swi~~tt~~nerton in the desert was a real treat. It's something I'll remember all my life because he was the dean of desert painters. And we all respected him for, even back in Chicago I'd see his paintings and prints there, and I always admired his work. But when we were out in Monument Valley, of course, he knew everyone. And he knew the Indians. He knew where to go. And it was so important to know a man like that. And at that time he was ninety. And we had an early breakfast and then a lot of painting. Then he'd rest awhile. And then we'd go out later in the evening. They worked very rapidly. These sketches that they made were, oh, they wasn't over forty minutes. And he'd be through. And I'd have to rush along. Hello.

PY: I think you were talking about Jimmy Swi~~tt~~nerton.

FP: Oh, yes.

PY: Down in Monument Valley.

FP: But he was, told so many, many stories, you know. And

we both wished that we'd had a tape of these various stories. They were just fascinating. And, of course, I think you know that he was one of the first cartoonists to have a strip. Then he had this, ran this little Jimmy, and then, oh, the canyon kids and things like that. You've read them in the Hearst paper and then later on the Cosmopolitan magazines or Good Housekeeping, one of them. I've forgotten which, but canyon kiddies. And that was based on the desert life and the Indians. He was one of the big thrills to be out with him painting. I remember one time that, oh, speaking of this rain that we've had in the last few days, I was up in Painted Canyon camping in a Volkswagen. And my friend, oh, left a, started to sprinkle and rain, and he knew or felt what was coming so he left me. And I had to stay there all night because I'm not supposed to drive with contact lenses at night. So I waited until morning. And I never was so happy to get out of a place because the sprinkles turned into a real hard rain. And it was just like a river. And I couldn't turn around. I wanted to because unfortunately it was downhill. But I hit the pavement and on the road to Mecca. And I was never so glad to see a pavement in my life. But Jimmy Swinnerton heard of it

from some source, artist friends of mine. I think it was, oh, I don't recall which one it was. But anyway, he ~~hard~~ heard that I'd been up in the canyon, got rained out or caught in one of these flash floods. And he says, you know, Penney, don't you know that you can't climb those clay walls when it rains like that or flash flood? And you're sort of a damn fool. I said, I certainly am. I'll never do it again. (chuckle) Oh, he was delightful. I can't recall any more stories, only that he'd work constantly, a twelve by sixteen, and they were sort of a record of what he'd seen around the desert. And then he'd enlarge them to sizes twenty-four by thirty and those sizes up there. The large, but the twelve by sixteens were just impressionistic notations of color that he'd see in nature. And the rest of it was more or less academic. But these twelve by sixteens have become priceless. I remember Paula, my wife, had them in her gallery, a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Then they went up to three hundred and four hundred. I don't know what they're selling for now. But more than four hundred dollars. Probably five hundred, six hundred. But they're priceless little gems of impressionistic color. The color and keynote for the larger paintings. And that's

about the story of Jimmy Switterton. He was full of jokes and laughs and in fact he was such delightful company and a good guy that, oh, Hearst kept him on a retainer fee. And he didn't do any cartooning or any work or any painting at all. Just kept him at Flagstaff there to greet the friends that William Randolph Hearst would send out from Chicago or New York, wherever he was. But he was very interesting. The John Hilton told me sort of an interesting story about the, two of the, well, Jimmy Switterton and one other painter, Maynard Dixon. And Maynard Dixon really painted beautiful sky. But they were decorative. Anyway, they were out painting together, the two of them, and they're always making wisecracks. And Maynard Dixon came over to see what Jimmy Switterton was doing. Says, well, I see that you've painted a cabbage patch, you know. That's what it looked like. Little impressionistic notes, you know. And Jimmy pipe cracked back, says, well, yes, but I don't paint clouds like stones and rocks. In other words, they were more or less static, but beautiful skies in a decorative manner. Well.

PY: Did you know Fred Chisnall?

FP: Fred who?

PY: Chisnell.

FP: Yes. They belonged to a club, the Palate Club, Shadow Mountain Palate Club, which carried on for years. It started, I guess you're familiar with that club. Well, that club is interesting. And they keep a historical, not so much a record, but photographs of the different personalities and artists. They meet once a month. And they have a luncheon, then a demonstration. And then they have an exhibit. They're going to have one next month, as well as an exhibit and sort of an annual ball. But they meet during the wintertime. They meet every month. And they have the luncheon and the demonstration, which is a very good thing for those who want to watch and see how different painters work. And they're usually painters from out of town, which is better because they can always watch the local ones paint, you know. We'd go out once a month for a little field trip down at La Quinta or someplace, different location.

PY: And Fred was a member of this, you're saying?

FP: Who?

PY: Fred Chisnell was a member of this?

FP: I think he was, he gave a demonstration. I know his wife was. Yes. And any number of the desert painters belonged.

There's McCoy, Wilton McCoy. And incidentally he has one of these Foster books out on painting the desert. Very fine painter. But there's different ones that started for Mike Rahl. Does beautiful photography. And they had as many as two hundred at their luncheons. And it's really a delightful organization. Of course, there's others down in the Palm Springs like the Desert Art Center and the Civic Arts Center. They're different, you know, different purpose. But they all give shows and exhibits.

PY: Do you remember much about John Hilton?

FP: Very little. I met him a few times, but he contributed a lot to the desert. He painted a lot of the different things, like the beautiful sand dunes and verbenas and did a good job on those. Then I remember particularly one of his painting trips down in Baja. And he came back with these beautiful things with canyons and Mexico. And I think they were some of the finest work he's ever produced. Of course, they're all sold. That's one thing about his things, they're full of light and sunlight, which people like. And they were practically a sell out at each of his shows. In other words, people like sunlight. I try to get sunlight in my work because I know

if you, maybe your artistic friends will appreciate a gloomy sky, but who wants a dark gloomy sky in your home. And it proves time and time again if you get a dark sky, why you better have some sunshine someplace or it won't sell. But, of course, speaking about the desert, I enjoy painting different subjects. As you came here to the studio, you notice that I like to switch around. We're going to take a trip this summer to Utah, Monument Valley and Colorado. And then we're taking, during the hot weather, probably August or September, we're going to Alaska. There I'll take again probably mostly slides. And then pencil sketches and combination of rough sketches, color sketches and slides. I'll be able to work up a catalogue for future work. That's one thing that you artists should do, you know. You have to, I keep, hold back a whole group of small sketches and not for sale because I feel sometime I'll need a, I need inspiration. And I'll just pull out these different sketches of whatever they may be. There's an interesting one over there, speaking of canyons and floods and things. That's, all the palm trees, that's up in Andreas Canyon. And it's still controlled by the Indians. It's right up Palm Canyon, south you know, but

you'd be surprised how many people out here never been there. And they never been to places like Painted Canyon or Box Canyon. And, of course, my wife always kids me about Mecca because it's not a very clean town, but it's sure interesting around there where, it's the doorway to Box Canyon and Painted Canyon and the Salton Sea. And the Salton Sea and the smoketrees make lovely subjects when they're, when the light is right. It has to be a clear day. Otherwise, you'd miss the lake. And then there's another time when the trees are in bloom. That is, the mesquite and the ironwood. It's just beautiful. They give out sort of a purplish flower, sort of a pinkish-purple. It's very seldom that you get these. Have to have a certain amount of rain. And speaking of, just a little touch of history that you probably know, but up at the Living Desert you drive on up to the end of the fence up there. Then there's an experimental station for the University of California. I think it's San Bernardino or Redlands. And they have an experimental station up there for the amount of rain or water that the verbenas need. If they get too much, they don't bloom. And if they get too little, naturally, they don't bloom either. So if they are successful,

this experiment, while they'll put on, oh, you can have verbenas in your front yard and if you give them the right amount of water. I haven't heard recently of that, but Mr. Boyd was very kind to invite a group of us artists who had painted dioramas for the Living Desert and invited us up there to a little party and picnic. And he's the one that donated some of the land there to the Living Desert; the majority of the acreage was a gift from Mr. Boyd. That's a part of history that we'll all appreciate because the Living Desert is the place where they bring busloads of children and take them on hikes and different plants and trees, everything associated with the desert is up there. It's always labeled, you know, what plant it is and so forth. But it's really quite a study because I get stuck every once in awhile to know what plant. I paint the thing, then I wonder what the actual name of the plant is or the bush or what have you. There's so many different names. Burrow wood. Any questions you think of to . . .

PY: Just in terms of desert painters, was the Palette Club the only one way that you really all got together. Did you ever get together in sharing notes on painting a desert item?

FP: Oh, we'd always, we'd have a group of us, you know, that would, it wasn't always a club, no. We had, you'll get a kick out of this, we had what my wife called a men's club, and we call it the Rovers, oh, she called is the Rover Boys because we were roving all over the desert. And this consisted of, oh, anyone interested in holding a palette or painting, why they were welcome. Then finally, why Larry, Larry Sikes was always there on every Friday. He was the manager of O'Donnell Golf Course. And nothing could stop him from going out painting on Friday. So we'd get, oh, different boys and go out in the desert, and it was a regular institution that Friday. But he's been very busy with the club in recent years and we haven't had a chance to get out. But it's delightful just to freshen up because you can get so static and stale in the studio working all the time. It's a relief to get out, and even though you just make pencil sketches or just go out and enjoy yourself and have lunch, why it's worthwhile to absorb the beauty of the desert. I remember one thing that at the spring of the year the little desert flowers, little belly flowers, we called them belly flowers because you'd have to get down on your stomach to even see them. They were tiny, but they're beautiful little things. And it was just

little things like that would make you love and appreciate the beauty of the desert. And we'd take our lunch, you know, and spend the day. Probably three or four hours of painting and lunch and probably home early. But that was a lot of fun. And we'd keep a record of the places and the time. And if you were out in the desert and see something beautiful like the sunset, five o'clock, if you go back there the next day at that same time, and if you're lucky, why you'll see the same effect. And if it's a clear day. If it's a cloudy day, why the effect may be different. But it's hard to judge. But it's worthwhile taking a chance for your retouch or making a record of the sunset. I think you were asking about John Hilton. I think that's one thing he specialized in, in sunsets because that's the warmest light there is. And it gives you, not a garish sunset, you know, that you see out here once in awhile because it looks like a house on fire. Well, that would drive you crazy in a painting because it looks good in nature, but in a painting it's too gawdy and too red, burn you up.

PY: So each of the painters really then had his own style and his own interests.

FP: That's right. Glad you brought that up because one of

our friends went out with us, you know, and painted, was working on a smoketree. And several of us were painting smoketrees. I think there were about eight of them. And every smoketree was painted differently, you know. They all had their own approach to what a smoketree should look like. And it's always a challenge because I know that a lot of times I get my smoketrees to look like rocks, so I immediately scrape them out with a palette knife and start over again. They all paint differently. The may come under the influence of such men as Maynard Dixon or Jimmy Switterton, but they gradually all absorb certain amount of their technique or whatever they have to give. But then in years, or a year or so, why they get back to their own individual self in painting. That is, they paint like themselves. They're individual. There's one thing that I might mention in the use of slides. A friend of mine, Carl Albert, he's an excellent painter, and it takes any number of slides, transparencies. And I said, well, oh, Carl, you don't recommend these to your students? Oh, definitely not. Hell, no. Gee, they would make just a large kodakchrome out of slides, which they would do. But a slide can be used intelligently. It can refresh

your memory of the spots you're in. Or if you get stuck, which I do a lot of times, foreground interests, why you put on a slide and it will help you. And I know that an excellent painter, Ellenshaw, used to be with the movies. And he had, in his studio, he had a whole plate-glass window. And the thing is covered with slides. And he puts a light in back of that and he can select maybe as many as thirty-five slides for one painting. And he'll just use those as reference. And in New York Art Students League I was taught to look up your reference, and then pile them up, pile the books up or whatever you have from your empty files, pile them up and put them on the high shelf. And I find that so true. You have to do that. Now, for instance, I have a large file on Grand Canyon. I went through, well, I went through about five hundred magazines and I kept certain things that impressed me about Grand Canyon in my mind. And then when I went to Kansas, I carefully sketched it in because it's a difficult subject. And it demanded drawing, careful drawing, not drawing to cover up with paint or applique it with paint, that wouldn't be painting at all, but I mean the detail, the construction lines, simple,

straightforward line. Then apply the acrylic color, carried on as far as I could in acrylic, which is a fast dryer, and intervening coats were not difficult. But I kept these, about three things that I saw out of maybe five hundred magazines. You know, they were Arizona Highway. I kept those three main things in mind I wanted to express. And the painting came out real well. In fact, I'm glad to say, it was one of the prize winners at the Date Festival down here. And that's one phase of painting. Don't copy your slides. Then another amusing thing came up. I don't know why I did this, but I do it myself now. Or I should do it. This Carl Albert had a sea right in the middle of his painting. And I said, "Carl, what are you going to do with that sea?" He said, "I'm going to stay away from it." In other words, you can't have any main point of interest right plunked in the center. It has to be either the right or either the left. Then you get an interesting swing. And it blocks the viewer from going into your picture. I was first taught, both my wife and the former curator of the Palm Desert Museum down here, let your eye take a pleasant trip through your canvas. In other words, it may not be a road, or it could be a road,

but it could at least be a path or some entrance where you could ride your horse and have a pleasant trip. I always keep that in mind. Never block up your painting so you can't get into the painting. The feeling of space and distance. And so those who paint, why put a scene right in the middle of your canvas and stay away from it.

PY: In the years past, was there much opportunity to exhibit work in the area here? Were there galleries?

FP: Well, the galleries are strange things. You know, to get started I think it's very difficult for an artist. I did all sorts of things. I was in business two times. Once was in the wholesale lamp business and making early California lamps with the wood designs and the Monterey type wood iron and so forth and pottery. And that was in Los Angeles. Then I was in business again with my father during the war. But I could never, never be happy in business. I always wanted to paint. And I painted on weekends when I could. Then later on, I retired and did nothing but painting. But to get started, it is a, it's not an easy thing. You have to build up your reputation by sending paintings to every exhibit that you can think of. Plus the fact the different organizations

like the Palette Club and the civic club, you know, the Civic Arts, and various organizations that will show your work. Then Paula made a lovely book on my work to present to the Grand Central Gallery in New York. And you have to, that's dynamite to get in, you know, to be accepted. So this book showed various phases of my work in different spots in the desert and what have you. And then that was sent in, and then finally it was accepted. Then we sent paintings back there a couple of times. But the expense of sending back there is so terrific. And they wanted a change of paintings, so it cost us seven hundred dollars just to get them crated to send back there. So we were very happy having this, our own gallery here, and my studio, Desert Island. Then people would come in, friends, and there's one man, Charles Dana, that manufactures paint for, oh, up in San Francisco. He manufactures tube paint as well as paint in pails and so forth for Foster & Kleiser. And he became interested in my work. And he has four or five homes, and he's bought thirty-five of my paintings. And it's just different people like that I know, and who collect paintings. And I have all I can do to keep up here. And then it gives you a certain amount of freedom

because if you associated with the gallery, they want paintings. And I don't blame them. They're in business to make money. But they want paintings that they can sell, and sell quickly, and then they put you on the line for at least two or three exhibits during the year. One man shows. And that will absorb so much time that you don't have anything to, any time to paint what you'd love to paint. For instance, I spoke before, as they change around from ballet to circus, to desert to marine painting. So I like it the way it is. But it's still the desert, the main topic.

PY: Have you ever heard exhibit at the Desert Magazine Gallery?

FP: Yes. In fact, that's interesting, ~~to~~ you see Paula, my wife, was the curator there. And I was trying to my best to get in. And I just came back from a trip to Europe, and I had a few paintings there. And I was trying to get back in shape, and subject material, too, for presentation at this gallery. And even then I wasn't quite sure of myself on certain subjects, but she helped me a great deal in getting simplicity to my work. And she's an excellent designer. In fact, she was a designer up in Seattle for, of all things, Paula pajamas. And which was a national concern. But she did all the

designing and had a very successful business. But she knew design and had been accepted by so many different concerns as a consultant for design. And in other words, some of my friends say, what's your happiest moment. I says, well, the minute Paula can let me sign a painting. In other words, she looks it over for design. And she knows repetious form, bump, bump, bump. And so then I go back to the drawing board and make the changes, so she's been a wonderful help to me. In other words, you asked me about the gallery. That's where I met Paula. And we went together for awhile, and we were finally married. Then we're happy married. But, yes, I certainly do remember that. I just hope that, whether it's a historical society like your . . .

TAPE 2, SIDE 2:

FP: She can give you all the history of that.

PY: Was it a unique place in the sense that no one else in the area was doing it? You said they were bringing together western artists unlike any other gallery.

FP: Yes. Oh, definitely. She's very good at it. She knows the whole history of these different artists, you know. Jimmy Switterton, Peter Hurd, and the whole works.

Let's see. Bob Rochell. Is this tape on?

PY: Yes, it's on now.

FP: But do you mind holding that just for a minute.

THE REST OF SIDE 2 IS BLANK.

END OF INTERVIEW

Side 2 of 2:

FP: She can give you all the history of that.

PY: Was it a unique place in the sense that no one else in the area was doing it? You said they were bringing together western artists unlike any other gallery.

FP: Yes, oh, definitely. She's very good at it. She knows the whole history of these different artists, you know, Jimmy and Peter Herd and the whole works. Let's see. Is this tape on?

PY: Yes. It's on now.

FP: But do you mind holding that just for a minute?

(THERE IS NO MORE ON THIS TAPE. I THINK I ALREADY DID THIS BEFORE.)